United Nations S/2015/336

Security Council

Distr.: General
15 May 2015

Original: English

Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Afghanistan

(Reporting period: 1 September 2010 to 31 December 2014)

Summary

The present report, the third report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Afghanistan, contains information on the six grave violations committed against children and, more broadly, on the situation of children affected by armed conflict in the country during the period from 1 September 2010 to 31 December 2014.

The report demonstrates that children bear the brunt of the conflict in Afghanistan and that their suffering has increased over time. More children were killed or maimed in 2014 than in any previous year under review. Children continue to be recruited and used for various purposes, including as suicide bombers, abducted and deprived of their right to education and health care.

While commendable progress has been made in ending and preventing the recruitment and use of children by the Government of Afghanistan and its National Security Forces, important challenges persist. The report provides a series of recommendations to prevent and end grave violations against children in Afghanistan and to improve measures for their protection.

15-07774 (E) 240615

Please recycle

I. Introduction

1. The present report, prepared pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions, is my third report on children and armed conflict in Afghanistan. It covers the period from 1 September 2010 to 31 December 2014 and highlights trends and patterns of violations committed against children in the context of the armed conflict in Afghanistan as well as progress made in ending such violations, as recommended by the Working Group of the Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict in its conclusions on the situation of children and armed conflict in Afghanistan, adopted on 3 May 2011 (S/AC.51/2011/3).

2. The information contained herein was collected, verified and compiled by the Afghanistan country task force on monitoring and reporting within the framework of Security Council resolution 1612 (2005). The report identifies parties to the conflict responsible for grave violations committed against children and highlights areas for reinforced and targeted monitoring as well as for the development of interventions to prevent further violations and respond to the needs of victims. It makes specific recommendations to strengthen the protection of children affected by the conflict in Afghanistan.

II. Military and political developments and parties to the conflict

3. The reporting period was marked by increased military activity and the deterioration in security compared to the previous reporting period, covering 1 September 2008 to 30 August 2010 (S/2011/55). The latter half of the current reporting period saw the responsibility for security transitioning from international military forces to the Afghan National Security Forces and a political transition consisting of presidential and provincial council elections in 2014. Insurgents contested these transitions, leading to increased conflict-related violence. Since 2010, the Taliban-led insurgency has spread from the south of the country into previously stable areas in the north, east, west and central regions.

4. During the presidential elections, held in two rounds on 5 April and 14 June 2014, the country task force documented a sharp increase in the number of incidents affecting children. In the weeks after the vote, political tensions over allegations of fraud led to a serious political impasse, creating political, security and economic uncertainty. The situation was resolved following mediation by the United Nations and the international community, resulting in the peaceful formation of a Government of national unity.

5. In 2014, the Afghan National Security Forces assumed responsibility for security in all areas of the country from the international military forces. The bilateral security agreement, signed on 30 September 2014 by the United States of America and the national unity Government in Kabul — a precondition for a separate, status-of-forces agreement with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which was signed on the same day — led to the transition from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) of NATO to the new Resolute Support Mission, effective 1 January 2015. The Resolute Support Mission shifts the focus of the international military forces from combat operations to training, advising and assisting the Afghan National Security Forces.

Afghan National Security Forces

6. The Afghan National Security Forces are composed of all Government security forces, including the Afghan National Army, the Afghan Air Force, the Afghan National Police, the Afghan Local Police and the National Directorate of Security. In the annexes of my 2014 annual report on children and armed conflict (A/68/878-S/2014/339), the Afghan National Police and the Afghan Local Police were both listed as parties that recruited and used children. In 2011, the Government of Afghanistan entered into an action plan with the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the National Security Forces.

7. At the time of reporting, the Afghan National Army and the Afghan Air Force, with 164,161 and 6,208 troops, respectively, had demonstrated improved confidence and the capability to plan and conduct operations. Important enabling capabilities, such as protected mobility, air support and firepower, were enhanced significantly in 2014. However, high attrition rates combined with low rates of re-enlistment, poor logistics as well as still developing intelligence coordination and air support capability remained challenging.

8. The Afghan National Police was first listed in 2010 in the annexes of my annual report on children and armed conflict (A/64/742-S/2010/181) for its involvement in the recruitment and use of children. Under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior, the Afghan National Police is the primary law enforcement agency and also takes part in military operations with other elements of the Afghan National Security Forces. By the end of 2014, there were 156,751 Afghan National Police, including Central Prison Department guards, against a target of 157,000. Armed groups continued to target the Afghan National Police, resulting in a particularly high casualty rate. The Afghan National Police comprises five pillars: uniformed (civilian) police, national civil order police, border police, anti-crime police and enabling forces. The Afghan National Police continues to face capacity challenges in terms of planning, training, command and control, as well as in the fight against corruption. Oversight was strengthened in December 2011 with the establishment of the Human Rights, Women and Children Affairs Directorate in the Department of Control, Complaints and Petitions of the Ministry of the Interior. However, impunity for human rights violations remains a major concern. The Deputy Director of the Directorate also acts as the high-level child protection focal point for both the Afghan National Police and the Afghan Local Police.

9. The Afghan Local Police was first listed in 2012 in the annexes of my annual report on children and armed conflict (A/66/782-S/2012/261) for its involvement in the recruitment and use of children. The Afghan Local Police programme, created in 2010, is bilaterally funded by the United States and embedded in the command structure of the Ministry of the Interior. It aims to provide a community-based policing capability as a part of counter-insurgency efforts, in partnership with and trained largely by United States Special Forces. Its maximum strength increased from 10,000 in 2010 to 30,000 in 2013. By October 2014, 28,707 Afghan Local Police troops were covering 150 districts in 29 of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan. In August 2013, the head of the Afghan Local Police, General Alisha Ahmadzai, was designated as the high-level child protection focal point for the Afghan Local Police. During the reporting period, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) engaged with the Afghan Local Police Directorate and relevant organizations to advocate for the inclusion of additional human rights

training in the Afghan Local Police curriculum. Although the United States armed forces introduced basic human rights and child rights training into the curriculum of the expanded 28-day Afghan Local Police training programme, human rights violations by the Afghan Local Police have continued with complete impunity, including extrajudicial killings, torture and other atrocities against civilians, including children. Weak implementation of vetting procedures and the formation of unofficial Afghan Local Police units continue to result in underage recruitment.

International military forces

10. Since August 2003, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has been deployed under the authority of the Security Council, operating under NATO command. Since November 2008, the commander of ISAF has also served as the commander of the United States forces in Afghanistan, although the chains of command have remained separate. The Security Council, in its resolution 2120 (2013), encouraged ISAF to assist the Government of Afghanistan with the implementation of the action plan regarding children associated with the Afghan National Security Forces.

11. As at 1 January 2015, the NATO Resolute Support Mission had introduced plans to leave some 12,800 troops in Afghanistan, including the majority of the remaining United States troops, which are expected to decrease by half by 2016. The remaining United States troops continue to focus on counter-terrorism operations, as permitted under the Afghanistan-United States bilateral security agreement. Although a non-combat, "train, advise and assist" mission, the Resolute Support Mission supports counter-insurgency operations conducted by the Afghan National Security Forces. In resolution 2189 (2014), the Security Council reaffirmed the importance of sustainable progress on security, development, human rights, in particular for women and children, and of taking all appropriate measures to ensure the protection of civilians.

Armed opposition groups

12. Since 2007, Taliban forces and affiliated groups, including the Tora Bora Front, the Jamat Sunat al-Dawa Salafia and the Latif Mansur Network, have been listed in the annexes of my annual reports for their involvement in the recruitment and use of children; since 2011 for the killing and maiming of children; and since 2012 for attacks on schools and hospitals. These groups are considered to be persistent perpetrators of grave violations committed against children. At the time of writing, 30,000 to 35,000 Taliban fighters were reportedly active in most provinces of Afghanistan, although estimates vary considerably. In most provinces, the Taliban has established shadow administrative structures. With the withdrawal of ISAF in 2014, the group has shifted tactics to larger-scale assaults, primarily targeting the Afghan National Security Forces and Government officials. Attempts to engage the Taliban in peace talks have made little progress to date.

13. The Haqqani Network has been listed since 2010 in the annexes of my annual report for its involvement in the recruitment and use of children and since 2011 for the killing and maiming of children. Led by former mujahideen Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin, it operates primarily in the provinces of Paktya, Paktika and Khost. Although its attacks are claimed in the name of the Taliban, the Haqqani Network essentially operates as an independent entity, believed to be responsible for

complex attacks on both Government and international targets in heavily populated areas of Kabul. On 5 November 2012, the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2001) added the Haqqani Network to its sanctions list.

14. The Hezb-e-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has been listed since 2010 in the annexes of my annual report for its involvement in the recruitment and use of children and since 2011 for the killing and maiming of children. It was formed by former mujahideen Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in 1976, and re-emerged after the United States-led invasion in October 2001 in the eastern provinces of Kunar and Nuristan. While the objectives of Hezb-e-Islami appear to be consistent with those of the Taliban, the ambitions of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar likely extend to a prominent position within the political system. In February 2014, the group announced its formal participation in the presidential elections, nominating a senior leader, Qutbuddin Hilal. In September 2014, Hezb-e-Islami reiterated that any participation in the political process would be predicated on the complete withdrawal of foreign forces.

15. Al-Qaeda is believed to maintain a limited presence in eastern Afghanistan, especially Kunar and Nuristan provinces, and to continue to have links to anti-Government groups operating throughout Afghanistan.

16. Several other non-State armed groups continue to operate in Afghanistan, including militia elements from the civil war of the 1990s. Many of these armed groups retain links to political parties and leaders of former mujahideen jihadi factions and may operate in opposition to or in support of the Afghan National Security Forces. Such armed groups are frequently cited for grave human rights violations and regularly clash with each other, the Taliban and the Afghan National Security Forces while competing for territorial control. In some districts, such armed groups outnumber both the Afghan National Security Forces and the Taliban.

III. Grave violations committed against children

17. Monitoring and verification activities in the most conflict-affected areas remained challenging during the reporting period due to security constraints. Therefore, the data presented in this report may underrepresent the actual impact of the conflict on children and the number of incidents of grave violations committed against children by parties to the conflict.

A. Recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups

18. During the reporting period, the recruitment and use of children in both support and combat roles was observed throughout the country. The country task force documented the recruitment and use of 556 boys and four girls, 75 per cent of which (401 children) were recruited and used by armed opposition groups. In 2014, the country task force recorded 55 cases of recruitment by armed opposition groups, five cases by the Afghan National Security Forces and two cases by a pro-Government militia in Kunduz province. Although this decrease may be due to an increased commitment by the Government to prevent child recruitment, serious concerns remain over underreporting and the actual number of children associated

with the parties to the conflict, in particular with the armed opposition groups, remain, as that number is assumed to be much higher.

19. Among the armed opposition groups recruiting and using children, the country task force documented the Taliban forces, including the Tora Bora Front, Jamat Sunat al-Dawa Salafia and the Latif Mansur Network, as well as the Haqqani Network and Hezb-e-Islami. Most of these children were used to manufacture, transport and plant improvised explosive devices (IEDs). For example, in September 2013, in Gardez city, Paktya province, six boys were wounded when the IED they were assembling detonated inside a madrassa. In a separate incident, on 23 August 2014, in Ghazni city, the Taliban used three boys, aged six, eight and ten, to unknowingly transport pressure-plate IEDs in a wheelbarrow. Two boys were killed and one injured when the IEDs detonated prematurely.

20. The Taliban and other armed opposition groups also recruited and used children to conduct suicide attacks. Twenty boys have been killed carrying out suicide attacks since September 2010. For example, on 9 February 2014, in Paktika province, a 14-year-old boy detonated his explosives near a police checkpoint, killing himself and injuring five Afghan National Police officers and six civilians. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack in the local media. In October 2012, according to witnesses interviewed by the United Nations in Tirin Kot district, Uruzgan province, a suspected member of the Taliban forced a boy to push a bicycle-borne IED towards an Afghan National Army vehicle, killing himself and eight civilians. On 11 December 2014, a 16-year-old boy was killed when he detonated his suicide vest at the French Institute inside a high school in Kabul, an attack for which the Taliban claimed responsibility.

21. Children detained on national security-related charges for association with armed opposition groups also reported cross-border recruitment. Some described their experiences of having been abducted and taken to Pakistan for military training. The country task force continued to receive reports alleging the use of religious schools in both Pakistan and Afghanistan for child recruitment and military training by the Taliban and other armed opposition groups. In many cases, the children's parents claimed to be unaware that their children had undergone military training.

22. Regarding the 159 children reportedly recruited and used by the Afghan National Security Forces, the country task force was able to verify 38 cases in detail, including 27 children recruited by the Afghan Local Police, nine by the Afghan National Police, including the National Border Police, one by the Afghan National Army and one by a pro-Government militia group led by Nabi Gechi in Kunduz province. Children were recruited formally into the ranks of the Afghan National Police and the Afghan Local Police or were used in various support roles, including as porters, messengers or spies, often endangering their lives. For example, in March 2013, a 15-year-old boy was wounded in the Sirkani district of Kunar province in an IED explosion while carrying water to an Afghan National Army checkpoint. In November 2012, in the Shah Joy district of Zabul province, Afghan National Police elements forced two boys, ages 12 and 14, to inspect a suspicious bag for possible explosives. The bag contained an IED that killed both children.

23. I welcome the consistent downward trend in reported and verified cases of the recruitment of children by the Afghan National Police over the reporting period,

from seven verified cases in 2010 to only one reported case in 2014. There was one verified case of child recruitment attributed to the Afghan Local Police in 2014, compared to 13 in 2013, seven in 2012 and six in 2011. However, given the high degree of underreporting, this trend may not accurately reflect the actual scale of child recruitment into those forces. This analysis is supported by reports of the prevention of underage recruitment by Child Protection Units in Afghan National Police recruitment centres, which exist only in the four western provinces of Herat, Badghis, Ghor and Farah. Since their establishment in 2011, the four units have reportedly prevented 422 children (411 boys and 11 girls) from enlisting into the Afghan National Police, indicating a large scope for prevention activities in the 30 provinces where such units are not operational. According to the Human Rights, Women and Children Affairs Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior, in 2014, an additional 48 underage applicants were refused by Afghan National Police recruitment centres in Badghis, Herat, Laghman, Nangarhar and Nimroz provinces; in the same year, the Afghan Local Police reported the rejection of 55 children in 12 provinces.

24. Challenges remain, despite a strong commitment by the Government to end and prevent child recruitment into the Afghan National Security Forces and significant progress towards implementation of the action plan. Among the main concerns are: poor socioeconomic conditions that result in families compelling their children to join the Afghan National Security Forces for financial reasons; lack of adequate capacity and/or information within the Afghan National Security Forces for assessing the age of children; lack of clear policy directives; widespread impunity and lack of accountability; limited availability of birth certificates; identity documents that are easily falsifiable. Despite a significant increase in birth registration, from 6 per cent in 2003 to 37.4 per cent in 2012, more than half of children in the country remain unregistered.

25. According to the Ministry of Justice, between September 2010 and February 2013, at least 656 boys were held in juvenile rehabilitation centres across Afghanistan for alleged association with armed opposition groups. As at the end of December 2014, Ministry of Justice records indicated that 258 children were being held in the centres on national security-related charges. The National Directorate of Security also detained children allegedly associated with armed opposition groups, although the exact number of such children remains unknown. During the reporting period, children interviewed in the centres confirmed that they had been detained by the National Directorate of Security, in some cases for lengthy periods of time in excess of the 30-day legal limit.

26. The exact number of children held in detention facilities by international military forces during the reporting period remains unknown. In July 2012, the country task force received information on at least 90 children being held in administrative detention in the international military forces-controlled Parwan detention facility, many of them for years, in violation of their right to due process and international juvenile justice standards. The United Nations was not granted access to the facility until March 2013, when it was transferred to Afghan authorities. The country task force visited the facility and observed at least 70 boys, aged 12 to 17, who had been detained for alleged association with the Taliban and other armed opposition groups as well as for active involvement in hostilities. On 12 May 2014, during a follow-up monitoring visit, 42 children were being detained at the facility. They were kept separate from adult detainees and, during the

interviews, did not raise complaints about mistreatment. The director of the facility informed the task force that at least 41 children had been released to their families since the transfer of control to Afghan authorities, although no information on support provided to those children was available. With the conclusion of the security transfer in 2014, the United Nations has no further knowledge of detention facilities officially controlled by international military forces in Afghanistan.

27. The country task force, which has received continuing reports of torture and ill-treatment in detention facilities, prolonged detention of children by the National Directorate of Security and the Afghan National Police and the public display in national media of children detained for crimes related to national security, remains concerned over the lack of documentation, protective services and adequate reintegration measures. According to a January 2013 UNAMA report on the treatment of conflict-related detainees, which covered the period from October 2011 to October 2012, 80 of 105 interviewed children (76 per cent) had experienced torture or ill-treatment, an increase of 14 per cent compared to the same period in 2010 and 2011. Thirty-three child detainees had been ill-treated or tortured by the National Directorate of Security, forty-five by the Afghan National Police, one by the Afghan National Army and one by the Afghan Local Police. The UNAMA report led to the issuance of Presidential decree 129, which required authorities to investigate allegations of torture, prosecute alleged perpetrators, release detainees and prisoners in arbitrary detention and increase the access of detainees to defence lawyers and medical personnel. However, only rarely did such allegations result in investigations and the prosecution of perpetrators. In February 2015, a follow-up report by UNAMA concluded that 44 of 105 child detainees (44 per cent) interviewed between February 2013 and December 2014 had reported ill-treatment or torture, including 25 children detained by the National Directorate of Security in 13 provinces, 16 detained by the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Border Police and three detained by the Afghan National Army. The National Directorate of Security issued an order granting unfettered access for human rights organizations, including UNAMA and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, to all detention facilities, including through unannounced visits.

B. Killing and maiming of children

28. Between 1 September 2010 and 31 December 2014, the country task force verified the killing of 2,302 children and injuries to 5,047 others (4,003 boys, 1,501 girls and 1,845 of unknown gender) in 3,911 separate incidents. While 2012 witnessed a drop in child casualties compared to 2011, the number continuously increased during 2013 and 2014. Child casualties recorded in 2014 (2,502 casualties) increased by more than 47 per cent compared to 2013 (1,694 casualties) and by 110 per cent compared to 2012 (1,190 casualties), bringing the total number of casualties over the reporting period to 7,349. Armed opposition groups, including the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, were responsible for 46 per cent of all recorded child casualties in 2011 (697 casualties), 56 per cent in 2012 (671), 53 per cent in 2013 (889) and 54 per cent in 2014 (1,343). The Afghan National Security Forces and pro-Government forces (395) and international military forces (38) were responsible for 433 child casualties in 2014, or 17 per cent of all child casualties recorded, an increase compared to 2013, after a gradual decrease from the elevated level of 2011. The rise is attributed to an increase in offensive operations and

counter-attacks by the Afghan National Security Forces against armed opposition groups in contested areas.

29. Clashes between the Afghan National Security Forces/international military forces and armed opposition groups were the main reason for child casualties (2,911 killed and injured), including from the detonation of explosive weapons in populated areas. Armed opposition groups were responsible for 37 per cent (1,087) and the Afghan National Security Forces/international military forces for 28 per cent (818) of child casualties resulting from ground engagements, while the remaining 35 per cent (1,006) could not be attributed to a specific party. Of the 818 casualties caused by the Afghan National Security Forces and international military forces that were attributable to a specific entity, 238 were attributed to the Afghan National Army, 198 to international military forces, 40 to the Afghan National Police and 26 to the Afghan Local Police. In 2014, child casualties during ground engagements (1,231) increased by over 330 per cent compared to the number recorded in 2012 (369), reflecting an increased focus by the conflicting parties on territorial control and an increase in armed clashes in populated areas.

30. Child casualties resulting from IED attacks by armed opposition groups, including the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, continuously increased, from 385 in 2011 and 370 in 2012 to 506 in 2013 and 664 in 2014. For example, on 8 April 2014, in Gajiri village, Ghazni province, the Taliban planted several IEDs targeting Government officials, resulting in the killing of one boy and injury to two boys and one girl when one of them stepped on a pressure-plate IED.

31. Throughout the reporting period, armed opposition groups, including the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, carried out suicide and other attacks against military and civilian targets, killing 210 children and injuring 439 others. For instance, on 6 December 2011, a splinter group of Lashkar-e Jhangvi, Lashkar-e Jangvi al Almani, attacked a Shi'a religious procession in Kabul, killing at least 10 children and injuring 12 others. The group claimed responsibility in a press release issued following the attack. In 2014 alone, at least 60 children were killed and 154 children were injured in such attacks, which often deliberately targeted civilians. In the most significant incident, on 23 November 2014, a suicide attack at a volleyball match in the Yahya Khel district of Paktika province resulted in the killing of at least 21 boys and injury to 23 others. The target was believed to be the Afghan Local Police personnel present at the game.

32. Airstrikes by international military forces injured 174 children in 2011, decreasing to 78 such casualties in 2012, 56 in 2013 and 36 in 2014. ISAF directives limiting the use of aerial force during military operations have been credited as the main reason for this trend. Drone attacks reportedly resulted in the killing of two children in 2013 and 10 child casualties in 2014. For instance, on 21 May 2014, a 14-year-old boy was killed and a 13-year-old boy was injured in a drone strike while playing in the vicinity of a Taliban meeting.

33. During the reporting period, at least 14 children (six boys, three girls and five of unidentified gender) were killed and 88 children (49 boys, 22 girls and 17 of unidentified gender) were injured in incidents of cross-border shelling from Pakistan, mostly in Kunar province. Five children were killed and 52 more were injured in 2014 alone. According to the Pakistani armed forces, these incidents occurred in the course of operations against insurgents who were active in the border areas and who were conducting attacks against targets in Pakistan.

34. At the time of writing, decades of war and instability had left an estimated 521 square kilometres of land throughout Afghanistan contaminated with explosive remnants of war. The country task force has documented the killing or maiming of at least 1,275 children (887 boys, 154 girls and 234 of unidentified gender) in incidents involving explosive remnants of war. For example, on 9 December 2012, at least nine girls were killed and another two were injured when a mine exploded in the Chaparhar district of Nangarhar province. Child casualties increased consistently during the reporting period, reaching 81 per cent of all reported casualties involving explosive remnants of war in 2014. Despite continuous efforts to increase awareness and change behaviour to counter the risks posed by explosive remnants of war, the current mine risk education strategy faces significant challenges, in particular regarding outreach to the more than 50 per cent of Afghan children who are not in school.

35. Following sustained advocacy by the United Nations, ISAF and the international community took significant steps to clear abandoned firing ranges of unexploded ordnance. ISAF conducted surface clearance of more than 20 high explosive firing ranges and pledged to complete the surface clearance of all high explosive firing ranges early in 2015.

C. Sexual violence against children

36. During the reporting period, the country task force documented 40 reports of sexual violence involving 27 boys and 24 girls, the vast majority of which were attributed to the Afghan National Police and the Afghan Local Police. In some cases, the Government has demonstrated due diligence in the investigation, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators of sexual violence against children. For example, in March 2014, the Afghan National Police arrested a member of the Afghan Local Police for the alleged rape of a 7-year-old boy. The primary court sentenced the perpetrator to 10 years of imprisonment. In June 2014, the appellate court in the same province confirmed the decision of the primary court, but the sentence was reduced to five years of imprisonment by the Supreme Court in November 2014. In a separate incident, in December 2014, two members of the Afghan Local Police abducted and raped a 15-year-old girl in Kapisa province. The perpetrators had been arrested and an investigation was ongoing at the time of reporting.

37. Boys held in detention on national security-related charges also reported sexual violence or threats of sexual violence upon arrest or during detention by the Afghan National Security Forces, particularly by the Afghan National Police. In 2011, of 76 boys detained on national security-related charges and interviewed by the United Nations, 10 reported sexual violence or threats of sexual violence. In 2013, 15 detained boys also reported having been subject to rape, sexual violence or threats of sexual violence.

38. Children continued to be victims of sexual violence by armed opposition groups, including the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. In August 2013, a media report alleged that Taliban commanders had committed acts of sexual abuse against young boys. Children detained on national security-related charges reported that *boys had been sexually abused by Taliban and Haqqani Network commanders while* being trained to carry out suicide attacks. Such reports could not be independently

verified by the country task force. However, the United Nations expressed serious concerns over the protection risks for children whose identities have been disclosed during public testimonials of their experiences of sexual violence and over the continued violation of children's right to confidentiality and privacy by the media and State authorities. The country task force has repeatedly expressed these concerns directly to the authorities and urged them to respect the rights of concerned children and provide for adequate protection services.

39. The United Nations continues to express serious concerns regarding the culture of *bacha bazi* ("dancing boys"), generally associated with sexual exploitation and various forms of sexual violence against boys as young as six years old by men in positions of power. In August 2014, following a national inquiry into its causes and negative consequences, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission recommended that the culture of impunity surrounding the practice be urgently addressed.

D. Abduction of children

40. Members of armed opposition groups and the Afghan National Security Forces have abducted children for various purposes, including reprisal, ransom, punishment of victim's family members, sexual abuse or recruitment and use. During the reporting period, 111 incidents of abduction, involving 242 children (235 boys and seven girls) were reported, of which the country task force was able to verify 53 incidents affecting 93 boys and seven girls. The eastern region of the country remained the most affected.

41. The Taliban and other armed opposition groups were responsible for 44 incidents, affecting 80 boys and five girls, out of the 53 total verified incidents of abduction, for reasons including their alleged association with or use by the Afghan National Security Forces. Following their abductions, 20 boys were executed, the ears of two boys were cut off and one boy and one girl were raped. Other victims were either released or their fates remain unknown. The Afghan National Security Forces, often through tribal elders, have been involved in many negotiations to secure the release of victims.

42. The Afghan National Security Forces and pro-Government armed groups were involved in seven incidents of abduction, including the involvement of the Afghan National Police in one and the Afghan Local Police in four: 13 boys and two girls were abducted in these incidents in the central, north-eastern and western regions of the country. At least six of the boys and one of the girls were executed following their abductions and four were raped. For example, on 19 October 2013, in the Bala Buluk district of Farah province, four boys were summarily executed by the Afghan Local Police after being abducted and blamed for planting IEDs. I am deeply concerned at these reports and that no investigations have been opened into this and similar incidents to identify and hold the perpetrators accountable.

E. Attacks on schools and hospitals

Attacks against schools and associated persons

43. The country task force documented 883 incidents affecting children's access to education. After a decrease in documented incidents, from 197 in 2010 to 132 in 2013, 208 incidents were documented in 2014, which were mainly attributed to attacks by armed opposition groups on schools used as polling stations for the presidential elections (which represented 57 per cent of all attacks on schools in 2014). Advocacy by the country task force resulted in the removal of some schools from the list of polling centres and led to increased security measures. During the reporting period, attacks against schools and education personnel expanded from the south of the country to more secure provinces.

44. Armed opposition groups, including the Taliban, were responsible for 89 per cent of documented attacks against schools, including through use of IEDs, the burning of school buildings and property, forced closures of schools, and the killing, injuring, intimidation and abduction of educational personnel. More than 90 incidents of the burning of school buildings and property were documented during the reporting period, the majority by the Taliban and local elements opposed to girls' education. For example, in April 2013, a high school was set on fire at night in the provincial centre of Sari Pul province. Even when not directly targeted, schools were also affected by nearby attacks and military operations.

45. The country task force documented 111 incidents of killing and injuring of educational personnel and 36 incidents of abduction by armed opposition groups, including the Taliban. A large number of these attacks took place in 2011, with attacks decreasing until 2013, then increasing in 2014. For example, in September 2013, unknown armed opposition group elements forced a female teacher travelling to Farah City from her vehicle and killed her. In August 2014, in the Shah Joy district of Zabul province, the Taliban forcefully entered a school, abducted and later killed a 32-year-old male schoolteacher who had received prior warnings to cease teaching at the school.

46. The country task force was able to verify 23 of 62 reported incidents of threats against educational personnel and students, most of which targeted girls' education. In 2011, the Taliban reportedly issued a directive prohibiting attacks on schools and teachers, and in 2012 it denied responsibility for attacks against schools in five separate incidents. However, the Taliban continued to be the main perpetrator. In May 2013, for example, in the Khogyani district of Nangarhar province, a letter from the local Taliban warned that school personnel, teachers and students of a girls school would face serious action and that their faces would be covered in acid if girls continued to attend.

47. The Afghan National Security Forces and international military forces were also responsible for incidents affecting access to education, although to a far lesser extent. Incidents included complete or partial military use of school facilities, damage to buildings and property, intimidation of education personnel, raids and forced entry, seizure/looting of education materials and operations within the vicinity of schools, which resulted in the killing and injuring of students.

48. The country task force verified 51 cases of military use of schools, including 26 by armed opposition groups, nine by the Afghan National Army, seven by the

Afghan National Police, six by pro-Government armed groups and three by international military forces. The number of documented incidents was similar in each year of the reporting period. In one verified incident, in June 2014, in the Dasht-e Archi district of Kunduz province, the Afghan National Army appropriated a girls primary school for over three weeks. In a separate case, in the Wardoj district of Badakhshan province, three schools had been in military use by the Afghan National Security Forces since October 2013. Following advocacy by the country task force, one school was vacated in June 2014. Concerns remained throughout the period under review over the stationing of security forces near education facilities that resulted in collateral damage to schools and child casualties.

49. In 2014, the country task force verified the continued closure of 469 schools throughout the country due to insecurity, including 360 in the southern region. Efforts by school councils and local elders contributed to a slightly improved situation compared to 2013, when the Ministry of Education reported 539 schools closed owing to insecurity, affecting the access to education of approximately 115,000 children.

Attacks against hospitals and associated persons

50. The country task force documented 214 incidents of attacks or threats of attack against health-care facilities and medical personnel and other incidents affecting access to health care, including interference with polio vaccination campaigns and the military use of facilities. The majority of incidents were perpetrated by armed opposition groups. Of 20 verified incidents of military use, forced entry and search of health facilities and intimidation of health personnel, 12 were attributed to the Afghan National Security Forces, five to international military forces and three to pro-Government armed groups.

51. More than 155 health personnel were affected by targeted or indiscriminate attacks. The country task force documented 34 incidents of killing and injuring and at least 40 cases of abduction by armed opposition groups, resulting in the killing of abductees in seven instances. For example, in April 2013, in Jawzjan province, armed men reportedly associated with an armed opposition group stopped a marked humanitarian vehicle at gunpoint, killing the driver and injuring a medical doctor. The country task force also documented 12 incidents of intimidation of health personnel by members of armed opposition groups. For example, in July 2013, in Jalalabad city, Nangarhar province, a three-year-old girl was injured in an IED attack against the home of the head of the Nangarhar public health hospital, who had previously received threats from an armed opposition group member demanding that he treat armed group elements.

52. The military use of health facilities, as well as forced entry and searches by the Afghan National Security Forces, international military forces and armed opposition groups, also continued to compromise the neutrality of health facilities and disrupted access to health care. For example, the national civil order police raided two hospitals in the Sayed Abad district of Wardak province in April and May 2014, seriously assaulted several doctors and patients and caused damage to the facility while searching for members of an armed opposition group.

53. While polio eradication efforts in Afghanistan witnessed progress throughout the reporting period, prolonged insecurity and a lack of access to volatile areas posed challenges to vaccination campaigns. In 2013, access to the southern region

improved with the public support of the Taliban for polio vaccination efforts. In February 2014, however, with an escalation of violence in Helmand province, the Taliban suspended polio vaccination campaigns for several months. Reports of restrictions and limited access were also received from the Kunar, Nangarhar and Nuristan provinces in the eastern part of the country. For example, in March 2014, in the Bati Kot district of Nangarhar province, suspected Taliban members abducted seven polio vaccinators and smashed their equipment, stating that their jobs were anti-Islamic. In January 2014, in the Maiwand district of Kandahar province, members of an armed opposition group, reportedly the Taliban, abducted and assaulted four vaccinators and directed them to organize all of their activities through the local elders. In both cases, the abducted vaccinators were released following intervention by tribal elders. In October 2014, polio vaccine boxes were burned by the Taliban in Sari Pul province, depriving approximately 4,000 children under the age of five of vaccinations.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

54. Widespread insecurity continued to severely affect humanitarian access to children not only in the south and east, but also increasingly in the northern and western regions of Afghanistan. Incidents of abduction of humanitarian personnel peaked sharply in 2014, when at least 99 de-miners, 22 health personnel and four humanitarian staff members were abducted. Mediation by community elders usually proved the most successful means of negotiating the release of abducted humanitarian personnel. However, humanitarian personnel also have been killed in captivity or in attacks, including in December 2013, in the Musa Qaleh district of Helmand province, when a de-miner was abducted and killed by the Taliban after eight days in captivity.

55. Threats to and intimidation of humanitarian personnel and the looting of humanitarian supplies also affected the timely and effective delivery of humanitarian assistance. The Taliban issued several public statements threatening anyone perceived to be supporting the Government, including international organizations. For example, in October 2013, in Jalalabad city, Nangarhar province, an employee of a national non-governmental organization (NGO) reportedly received a text message from a suspected member of the Taliban, threatening him with beheading if he did not quit his job.

56. Armed opposition groups, including the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, were also responsible for indirect and targeted attacks on the convoys and compounds of humanitarian agencies, including the United Nations. For example, in May 2013, in a complex attack, claimed by the Taliban, on the compound of one international organization in Kabul, one staff member was killed and three others were injured.

57. Out of more than 20 verified incidents of killing and intimidation of humanitarian personnel, the country task force attributed seven to the Afghan National Security Forces, nine to international military forces and four to various other pro-Government armed groups. The majority of incidents took place in 2011, with a significant decrease over the following three years, when only three incidents were attributed to the Afghan National Security Forces and none to international military forces. For example, in June 2011, in the Nahri Saraj district of Helmand

province, a staff member of an NGO carrying out demining activities succumbed to his injuries after being shot by an international military forces patrol that reportedly mistook him for a member of an armed opposition group. Other incidents attributed to international military forces included instances of threats to service providers, in which they were warned to not extend services to armed opposition groups.

58. In March 2013, in Badakhshan province, the Afghan National Security Forces and local Government authorities stopped the distribution of aid to internally displaced persons, claiming that there were armed opposition group elements among them. In another incident, in January 2014, in the Nad-e-Ali district of Helmand province, the Afghan Local Police reportedly shot and killed a 16-year-old boy who was working as a volunteer for a polio eradication campaign.

IV. Progress in ending and preventing grave violations against children

59. On 30 January 2011, in the presence of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, the country task force in Afghanistan and the Government of Afghanistan signed the action plan for the prevention of child recruitment by the Afghan National Security Forces. At the invitation of the Government of Afghanistan, the Working Group of the Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict visited Afghanistan from 4 to 8 June 2012. The delegation met with the Government, the country task force and civil society to discuss the progress made in the implementation of the action plan and the impact of attacks on schools and hospitals on Afghan children.

60. The United Nations noted some progress and concrete steps taken by Afghan authorities following the signing of the action plan. However, political momentum was achieved only in 2013 when the Inter-Ministerial Steering Committee on Children and Armed Conflict started to meet more regularly to coordinate the Government's actions and collaboration with the United Nations. In May 2013, the Technical Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, chaired by the Director of the Human Rights Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and composed of focal points from all relevant Government entities, met for the first time since December 2011 and has gathered regularly since to advise on the implementation of the action plan.

61. Also in 2013, to further expedite action plan implementation of the action plan and build on political momentum, the country task force, together with Government partners, developed a 15-point targeted and measurable plan ("road map towards compliance") designed to complement and expedite the implementation of the action plan. In August, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) undertook a joint mission to Afghanistan aimed at facilitating that process. On 23 July 2014, following advocacy by the country task force, the Inter-Ministerial Steering Committee on Children and Armed Conflict officially endorsed the road map towards compliance. Earlier, on 6 March 2014, during the launch ceremony of the "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign, the Government of Afghanistan expressed its strong commitment to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by its security forces. The "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign is

a joint initiative by the Special Representative and UNICEF aiming to end child recruitment by all Government security forces around the world by the end of 2016.

62. The Ministry of the Interior continued to establish and strengthen Child Protection Units within the Afghan National Police and the Afghan Local Police recruitment centres in the western region, with the goal of identifying and rejecting underage applicants and referring them to the appropriate protection services. At the time of writing, 418 underage applicants, including girls, had been rejected in the provinces of Herat, Badghis, Ghor and Farah in the western region. The Ministry and the Technical Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict pledged to prioritize the replication of Child Protection Units in other branches of the Afghan National Security Forces and to expand them to all regions of Afghanistan in accordance with the road map. On 26 July 2014, the Ministry issued and disseminated to all Afghan National Police and Afghan Local Police units across the country a directive prohibiting underage recruitment and the use of children at their respective check points, including as messengers, tea boys, cooks and bodyguards. The directive also included sanctions against those who violate the order. The Ministry also appointed high-level focal points for children and armed conflict within both the Afghan National Police (the Deputy Director of Human Rights of the Ministry of the Interior) and the Afghan Local Police and developed a reporting format to document rejected applicants. This resulted in the initial sharing of such cases with the country task force for possible reintegration and reunification of the children, including activities such as livelihood opportunities, skills training, school enrolment and/or psychosocial support. In its third annual progress report on the implementation of the action plan, submitted in April 2014, the Government reported a total of 16 incidents of child recruitment into the Afghan Local Police.

63. Since September 2010, more than 8,000 individuals, including members of the Afghan National Security Forces, provincial and district authorities, religious and traditional leaders, civil society and educational personnel, health workers and members of the Child Protection Action Network (a network of community-based civil society, Government and local actors providing frontline child protection support and coordination in 31 provinces) were briefed by UNICEF, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and other partners on child protection issues, grave violations against children and prevention mechanisms. In 2014, UNAMA facilitated training sessions on child protection and the action plan for 25 personnel of the Human Rights Division of the Ministry of the Interior and 40 personnel of the Afghan Air Force.

64. During the first nine months of 2014, the Government conducted 51 training seminars and workshops for more than 1,000 police officers. These sessions focused on human rights issues, including children and armed conflict, and were supported by UNICEF and the European Union as well as NGOs with human rights expertise.

65. On 27 August 2014, the President of Afghanistan signed a decree, prepared with technical support from UNAMA, to criminalize underage recruitment by the Afghan National Security Forces. The decree was adopted by both parliamentary chambers and came into force on 2 February 2015. This is an important step since the criminalization of child recruitment lies at the centre of all efforts to ensure accountability and prevent the recruitment and use of children by both the Government and armed group actors. Age assessment practices were strengthened through the development of national guidelines with support from UNICEF. Another

milestone to strengthen the prevention of child recruitment was the endorsement of a national birth registration strategy (see A/69/801) and the overall progress in increasing birth registration coverage.

66. According to the Government, during 2014, and in compliance with the road map, the National Directorate of Security has instructed all departments to redirect all underage children to the relevant provincial children training and rehabilitation centre. In addition, the National Directorate of Security reported that it had paved the way to enable assessment visits by human rights activists to detention centres to ensure that children were not being detained. The National Directorate of Security further emphasized the need to strengthen accountability for perpetrators of abuses against children in order to ensure better compliance with the road map and the action plan. Moreover, it was reported that a unified procedure for considering the action plan and the road map in the recruitment process was agreed upon under the initiative of the Ministry of Defence.

67. Despite progress achieved to date, significant efforts are needed by all actors to fully implement the action plan in Afghanistan. This includes, for example, remedying the lack of programmes to address the use of children in support roles by the Afghan National Security Forces and addressing the lack of services and alternatives for children rejected from recruitment or released from active service. Furthermore, the implementation of existing national laws and policies to prevent underage recruitment remains challenging, in particular the availability and allocation of appropriate resources. A lack of accountability for human and child rights violations and a climate of impunity, in particular within the Afghan National Police and the Afghan Local Police, also continue to be major concerns and need to be addressed urgently.

68. On 12 May 2014, UNAMA issued the booklet entitled "Protecting Afghanistan's Children in Armed Conflict", a context-specific advocacy tool that addressed the six grave violations of child rights in armed conflict and highlighted the consistency of Sharia law with international human rights and humanitarian law. As at 24 July 2014, 38 advocacy initiatives had been conducted in 16 provinces, ranging from television programmes to community-level outreach. In a number of provinces, religious scholars included the booklet's key messages in Friday prayers.

69. Throughout the reporting period, the High Peace Council, appointed by the President of Afghanistan to negotiate with elements of the insurgency, continued to advocate for all parties to the conflict to prioritize the protection of children and to halt underage recruitment. The Afghan Peace and Reintegration Programme continued, albeit without a specialized mechanism for the reintegration of child recruits. The programme was established by the Government to strengthen the capacity of national and subnational institutions to support the peace process.

70. Dialogue with armed opposition groups in Afghanistan on the recruitment and use of children remained impeded by the security situation and the fragmentation of armed opposition groups, which posed an equal challenge for the attribution of responsibility and accountability for grave violations against children. As the continued recruitment of children remains a major concern, the United Nations stands ready to formulate, jointly with the Afghan authorities, a strategy to address this practice by armed opposition groups.

V. Recommendations

71. I condemn the grave violations committed against children by armed groups in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, the Haqqani Network and Hezb-e-Islami, in particular the use of children as suicide bombers and the killing and maiming of children resulting from the indiscriminate use of IEDs in populated areas, and urge them to immediately end all grave violations against children.

72. I welcome the tangible progress achieved by the Government of Afghanistan in implementing the action plan with the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the Afghan National Security Forces and the endorsement of the road map to further expedite the implementation process.

73. I remain seriously concerned by the widespread impunity for grave violations against children by Government security forces, including against children in detention for alleged association with armed groups, and call upon the Government to urgently address this issue.

74. I urge the Government to ensure due process for all children detained for alleged association with armed groups, regardless of the arresting authority, with an emphasis on alternatives to prosecution.

75. I am deeply concerned by the fact that 7,349 children have been killed or maimed during the reporting period, in particular during ground engagements. Taking into consideration the process of transition and the new mandate of NATO, I urge all parties to the conflict to uphold their obligations under international law and to continue to review tactics and procedures to avoid civilian casualties, particularly among children.

76. I urge the Government of Afghanistan to work closely with the United Nations and other security partners in Afghanistan to integrate adequate child protection and child rights training in pre-service and ongoing training for all Afghan National Security Forces.

77. I urge the Government to ensure that adequate resources are allocated to address remaining important challenges, in particular regarding prevention of and accountability for the recruitment or use of children. I further encourage the inclusion of child-specific provisions and adequate resources in the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme and in all peace and reconciliation efforts pursued by the Government with armed groups.

78. I call upon the donor community to provide sustained technical and financial support to the Government of Afghanistan in its ongoing efforts to strengthen its legal and governance mechanisms, particularly with regard to the State's judicial responses, to address impunity.

79. I call upon the donor community to ensure that sustainable funding is available for the timely and effective implementation of the aforementioned action plan, in line with the 2016 campaign goal of ending recruitment by Government forces, and to ensure adequate monitoring and reporting activities to better protect children in Afghanistan from the effects of armed conflict.